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Cruise Industry News

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No. 1
IN INDUSTRY REPORTING

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Germany

Destination Focus: Europe



The Cruise Experience Supersize or Downsize?

COMMUNICATIONS

Zebras and Horses

Zebras and horses may appear to be similar in many ways, but there are fundamental differences between them. The same can be said for offering mobile phone service on cruise ships and ferries.

Mobile phone service has been offered on some European ferries for as long as three years. While the general idea is the same as the service offered on cruise ships there are a couple of key differences.

The American market is divided almost equally between two cell phone technologies, GSM and CDMA. This means that ships that carry primarily American passengers will have to support both types of service, effectively doubling the expense to install the service and requiring a complex separate electronic infrastructure and a different set of roaming agreements. Europeans all use the GSM protocol so the ferries in that market only need to support GSM.

The satellite connection on cruise ships is generally based on C-Band technology which is available on a global basis. The majority of European-based ferries use a Ku-Band satellite system which operates on a regional basis, and while Ku-Band requires a much smaller satellite dish onboard than C-Band, Ku-Band connectivity is subject to signal degradation due to weather conditions such as rain and excessive cloud cover.

The biggest difference, however, isn't in the technology; it's in the market conditions. Most mobile phone plans in the American marketplace come with nationwide calling included, so the concept of "roaming" is in diminishing usage. A few years ago all North American users were accustomed to paying for roaming out of their home network. Today, roaming in the U.S. and Canada has all but disappeared. Europeans on the other hand, are more accustomed to the idea of roaming out of their home networks. When using their mobile phones on a cruise ship or ferry, passengers are inherently roaming internationally.

Some things to consider regarding roaming on ferries or cruise ships are that many Americans do not have international roaming capability enabled on their calling plans unless they request it. Another point is that many users in the European marketplace use pre-paid mobile phone services (approximately 50 percent in the U.K. as an example), which do not generally support international roaming. While there are emerging standards to allow pre-paid users to roam internationally, for the moment it's not the norm.

As mobile phone service becomes expected on cruise ships and longer range ferries, it becomes important to assess what features and functionality users will gravitate towards over time. It's widely believed that data services will grow in usage dramatically over the next couple of years, but what data service is used for will likely vary greatly from one market to another. For example, Web surfing from hand-held devices hasn't really taken off; SMS (short message service or text message) is used extensively in many parts of the world, but only minimally in the North American market.

As the cost of E-mail service on Blackberries, Treo and



Staying in touch while at sea

similar devices using GPRS data technology declines and is no longer exclusively the business tool of senior executives, usage of these devices is growing rapidly.

Wireless Maritime Services is the mobile phone service provider for several cruise lines, including Norwegian Cruise Line, Regent Seven Seas Cruises, Island Cruises, Royal Caribbean International, Celebrity Cruises, Carnival Cruise Lines and Holland America Line, and offers GSM, CDMA and GPRS service on all vessels. For the moment, the majority of the traffic on these systems is voice, people making and receiving phone calls on their mobile phones, but data services will be growing in importance going forward.

Offering mobile phone service on cruise ships and ferries is definitely not a one size fits all endeavor. — Rob Marjerison. (Rob Marjerison is vice president of business development and shipboard deployment for Wireless Maritime Services, a joint venture between Maritime Telecommunications Network/MTN and Cingular Wireless.)



Cell phone connection from the pool deck